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ABSTRACT

Although humor is an important phenomenon in human interactions, it has rarely been studied in the elderly. An understanding of responses to humor in aggressive cartoons as a function of advancing age would provide information regarding both the development of humor and the negative (aggressive) emotional experiences of the elderly. This study was conducted to examine differences between young and old adults in their responses to increasing levels of aggression in cartoon humor. Thirty-eight cartoons were selected which represented a wide range of aggression, humor, and subject matter. Pain was selected as a measurement of aggression. Older adults (N=61) and college undergraduates (N=93) rated the cartoons for funniness and for degree of pain. The results of the study support the hypothesis that advancing age is accompanied by a change in response to aggressive elements in humor. An inverted-U was found to be the best descriptor of the relationship between pain values and humor for older subjects, while humor was not predictable from pain values for the young subjects. While small increases in negative emotion (pain values) in cartoons resulted in increases in positive emotion (funniness values) in older subjects, the older subjects also found very aggressive elements more aversive than did the young subjects. (NB)

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Humor, Aggression, and Aging

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Humor, Aggression, and Aging

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Rationale: Although humor is an important phenomenon in human interactions, it has rarely been studied in the elderly. McGhee (1983) reported the existence of only one study that investigated humor development with advancing age (Schaier & Dicicelli, 1976). The key question is whether there are aspects of humor which remain relatively unchanged and others which show systematic change as a function of advancing age.

Humor studies have frequently focused on the relationship between humor and the degree of aggression (McCauley, Woods, Coolidge & Kulick, 1983; Cantor & Zillman, 1973). Although there appears to be a link between aggression and humor in cartoons, the exact nature of this relationship is unclear. It has been described both as a positive (McCauley et al., 1983) and as an inverted-U relationship (Deckers, Carr, & Burns, 1984).

Little is also known regarding the emotional experiences of the elderly. Early research suggests a drift toward the negative. The elderly have been found to be more introverted (Neugarten, 1977), experience more clinical depression (Gurland, 1976), and feel a reduction in positive affect (Bradburn, 1969). More recent studies challenge this position (Malatesta & Kalnok, 1984), reporting more similarities than dissimilarities in emotional experience between young and aged subjects. Physiologically, the aged have been found to respond

more easily than the young, to reach higher peaks of arousal, and require a longer time to readjust their internal systems after arousal (Schultz, 1982). If there is a drift toward negative emotionality with advancing age, and if ever increasing levels of aggression depicted in cartoons are instances of this, then funniness ratings of very aggressive cartoons should be lower for the aged than for the young.

An understanding of responses to humor in aggressive cartoons as a function of advancing age would provide information regarding both the development of humor and the negative (aggressive) emotional experiences of the elderly. The present study was designed to investigate the differences between young and aged subjects in their responses to increasing levels of aggression in cartoon humor.

Procedure: Thirty-eight cartoons were selected from a larger pool of cartoons that had been previously rated by young subjects who did not participate in the present study. Cartoons were selected which represented a wide range of aggression, humor, and subject matter. Pain was selected as a measurement of aggression as previous research (Deckers, Carr, & Burns, 1984) reported that the character's physical pain correlated better with cartoon funniness than aggression. Previous ratings of pain ranged from very little to a very great deal of pain with 16 cartoons in the low range (0-3), 13 in the moderate range (4-6), and nine in the high range (7-9). Funniness ratings consisted of 17 in the low range and 21 in the moderate range. A total of 61 noninstitutionalized adults age 60 and over (24 males, 37 females) and 93 college undergraduates (36 males, 57 females) met in groups of two to ten subjects and rated the cartoons for funniness and for degree of pain. Both scales ranged from 0 = not at all funny or no pain to 9 =

extremely funny or painful. Cartoons were presented in two different sequences, with the exception of the first two, which were used for the purpose of instructions. The subject pool was divided into two groups: aged and young.

Results: Mean pain and mean funniness values were computed for each of the 38 cartoons for the aged and young groups. Mean cartoon ratings were then analyzed to determine if funniness could be predicted from the pain ratings of each group. Table 1 presents the correlation (r) between pain (X) and funniness (Y), the multiple correlation (R) between X , X -squared, and Y , and the quadratic equations for predicting Y from X . Although the r was not significant for either group, adding the X -squared variable to the equation produced a significant increase from r to multiple R for the aged but not for the young. For the aged $r = -.258$, $p > .05$ increased to $R = .4119$, $p < .05$; for the young $r = -.157$, $p > .05$ increased to $R = .273$, $p > .05$. This suggests that the quadratic regression inverted-U line is a better description of the pain-funniness relationship than a linear regression line for the aged but not for the young. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship along with the best fitting regression line for the two groups.

Conclusions: The results do support the hypothesis that advancing age is accompanied by a change in response to aggressive elements in humor. Furthermore, an inverted-U was the best descriptor of the relationship between pain values and humor for the aged, while humor was not predictable from pain values for the young. Small increases in negative emotion (pain values) in cartoons resulted in increases in positive emotion (funniness values) in the aged. However, very aggressive elements were found more aversive by the aged than by the young, and

produced a decrease in related positive feelings.

These results may provide a base for future studies designed to explore the effects of other variables on humor and the emotional experiences of the aged. Specifically, further research might usefully investigate the effects of sex, education, and living situation (institutionalized vs noninstitutionalized) on the response of an aged population to negative emotion in cartoons.

Table 1
r, Multiple R, and Quadratic Equations
between Pain and Funniness

<u>Group</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>R</u>	Increase from <u>r to multiple R</u>
Young (n=93)	-.157	.273	
$y' = .30X - .04X^2 + 2.86$	$p > .05$	$F(2, 35) = 1.41,$ $p > .05$	$F(1, 35) = 1.89$ $p > .05$
Aged (n=61)	-.255	.412	
$y' = .72X - .09X^2 + 2.26$	$p > .05$	$F(2, 35) = 3.58,$ $p < .05$	$F(1, 35) = 4.36,$ $p < .05$

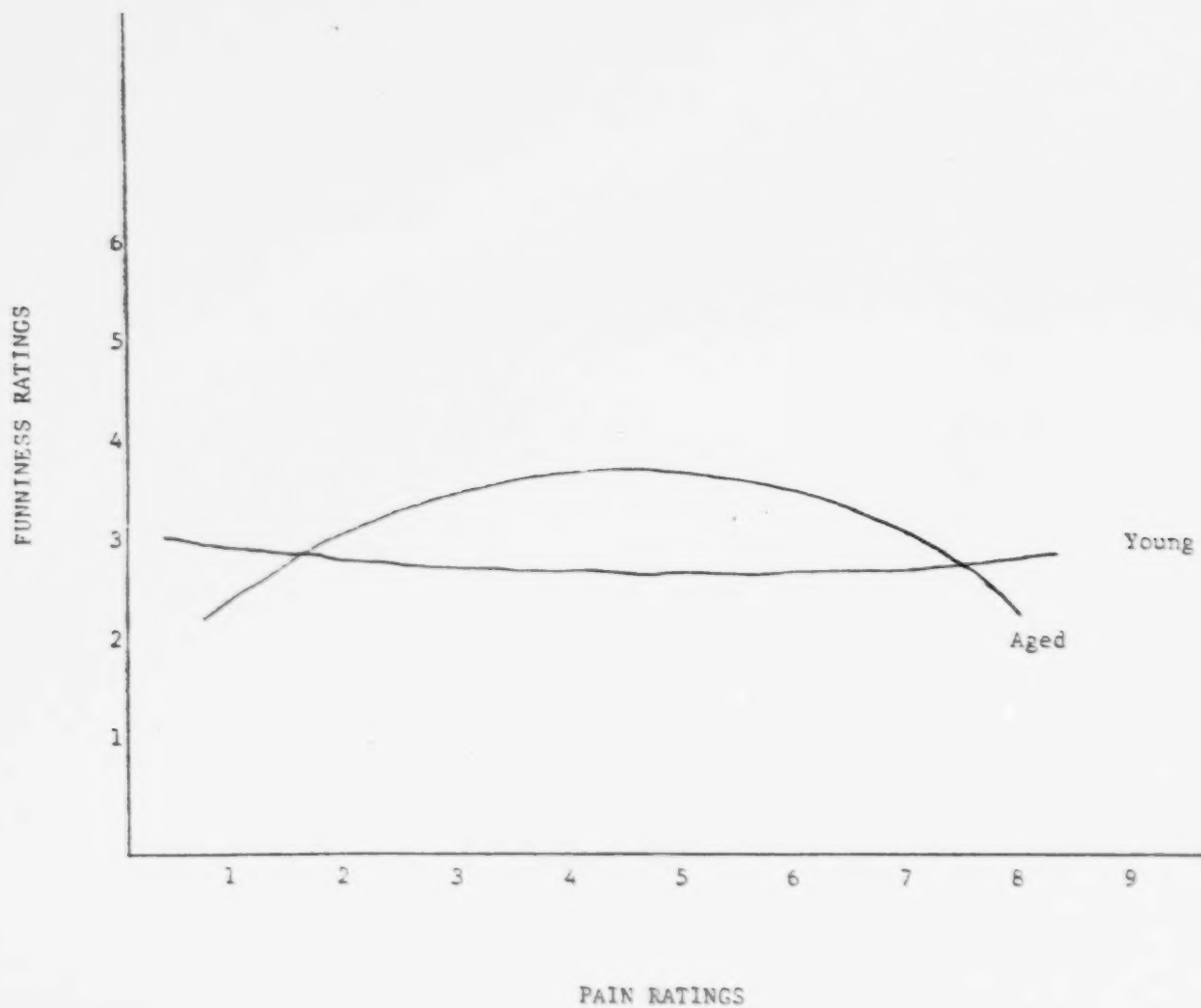


Figure 1. The quadratic curve describes the relationship between pain and funiness for the aged but not for the young.

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